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## **New exhibit explores sod house-era Nebraska**



In thousands of glass plate negatives, photographer Solomon Butcher created a priceless record of central Nebraska during its sod house era. A new exhibit at the Nebraska History Museum interprets Butcher's photos along with relevant artifacts from the period.

***Take Our Picture: Sod House Portraits by Solomon Butcher*** opens Saturday, June 15. The 1-4 p.m. free opening event features live folk music, crafts and family activities, and even the chance to build a life-size replica sod house out of recycled materials (which we promise are much lighter than sod bricks!).

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## June 6 is D-Day's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary



It was the largest amphibious invasion ever staged, and a turning point in the Western Front of World War II. By the end of the day, 156,000 American, British, and Canadian troops secured a foothold along fifty miles of German-occupied French coastline.

It isn't known how many Nebraskans fought in Normandy. It's thought to be in the hundreds. In 1991, NET Television talked with several Nebraska veterans about their experiences that day and over the following weeks. A [video excerpt](#) from *The War: Nebraska Stories* follows the story from D-Day through the capture of St. Lo in July—a battle in which men of the Nebraska Guard's 134<sup>th</sup> played a crucial role.



Another Nebraskan, Andrew Jackson Higgins—born in Columbus and raised there and in Omaha—became a boat-builder in New Orleans. Higgins designed the landing craft (the “Higgins boat”) that allowed troops to land on open beaches.

Higgins was little remembered in his hometown in 2000 when Columbus High School history teacher Jerry Meyer challenged his students to create a small memorial. The students became so enthused with the project that it grew into a community-wide effort and a landmark monument. Read more at the [project's website](#).

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## History Nebraska in the news

Conservators Hilary LeFevre and Megan Griffiths from History Nebraska’s Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center restored the wallpaper in Willa Cather’s childhood bedroom in Red Cloud. Watch TV news coverage at [1011 Now](#).

Chris Goforth talks about Nebraska buildings that survived an atomic blast (fortunately not in Nebraska!) on 1011's [Pure Nebraska](#).

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## What happened when a million Nebraskans drank Polio Punch





In 1962 Nebraskans organized the largest mass vaccination campaign in the state's history. An estimated 1 million Nebraskans drank polio vaccine at a series of "Sabin Oral Sunday" events that year.

But was the vaccine safe? Some Nebraskans—along with others across the US—were reported to have contracted polio soon after taking the vaccine. The US Public Health Service temporarily banned the vaccine for three months while it studied the situation. Lawsuits followed.

Do you remember the anti-vaccination movement of 1962? If you don't, it's because such a movement didn't happen. But why not? [Keep reading.](#)





## Nebraska Hall of Fame

will formally induct architect **Thomas Rogers Kimball** (1862-1934) in a ceremony at the State Capitol on June 25, 2-3 p.m. The event is free and open to the public.

Read more about the [Nebraska Hall of Fame](#).

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## Upcoming events

Besides the exhibit opening June events include two **Mad Science at the Museum** events for kids (June 6 and 20, a **Make Your Own Painted Scarf** workshop (June 8) as part of the ongoing Crafting Culture exhibit, and a **Brown Bag lecture** on June 20, “Ho for Lincoln! The Promises and Perils of Black Mobility in the Great Plains” by UNL professor Jeanette Jones. [Keep reading.](#)

# MAD SCIENCE AT THE MUSEUM

2019

NEBRASKA  
HISTORY  
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history.nebraska.gov



JUNE 6

Physical & Chemical Changes



JUNE 20

Kitchen Science



JULY 11

It's Electric



JULY 25

Rays of Light



AUGUST 8

Sources of Power



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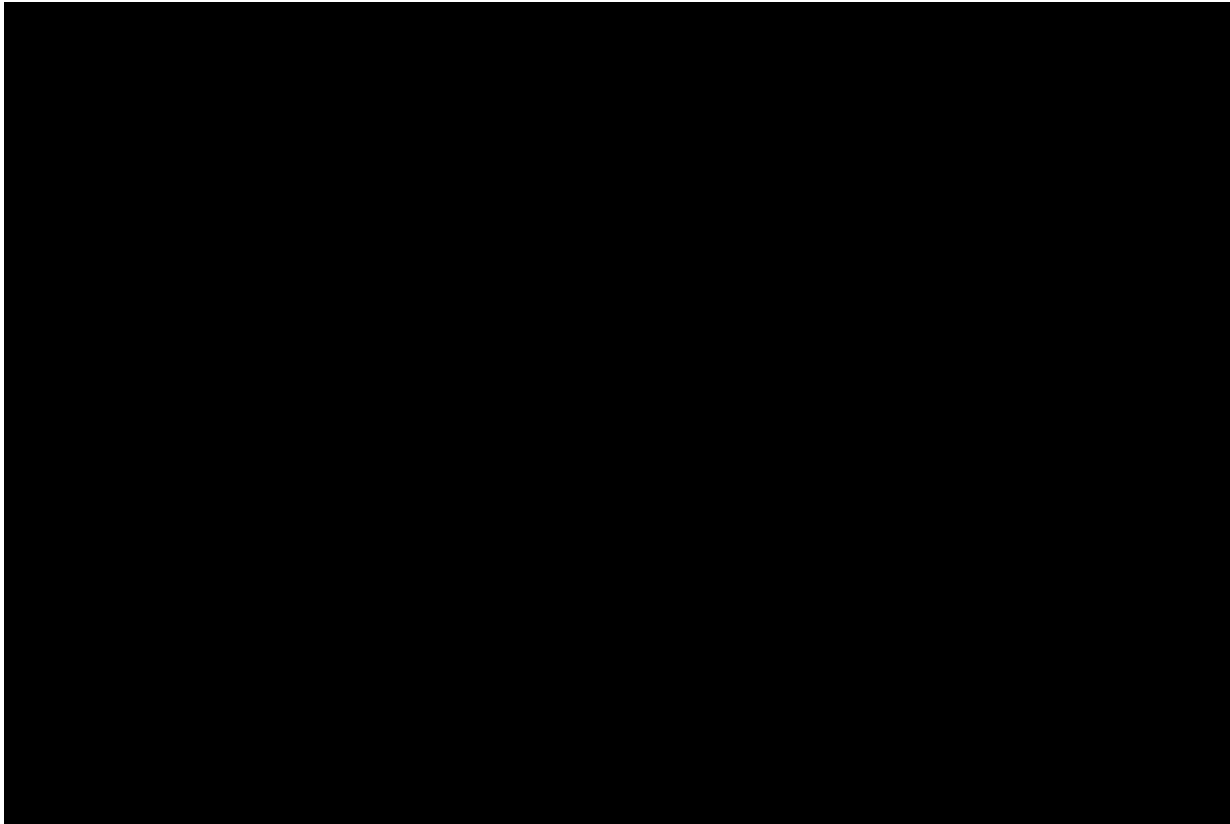
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Complete articles:

# What happened when a million Nebraskans drank Polio Punch

June 3, 2019

By David L. Bristow, Editor



In 1962 Nebraskans organized the largest mass vaccination campaign in the state's history. An estimated 1 million Nebraskans drank polio vaccine at a series of "Sabin Oral Sunday" events that year.

But was the vaccine safe? Some Nebraskans—along with others across the US—were reported to have contracted polio soon after taking the vaccine. The US Public Health Service temporarily banned the vaccine for three months while it studied the situation. Lawsuits followed.

Do you remember the anti-vaccination movement of 1962? If you don't, it's because such a movement didn't happen. But why not?



*Photo: Two early-1950s March of Dimes "Fight Infantile Paralysis" posters designed by artist John Falter (of Falls City, Nebraska). (History Nebraska 10645-1197, 10645-4333)*

### Polio Season

For much of the twentieth century, the months of July, August, and September were known as “polio season.” The earliest known case of polio in the United States was reported in Vermont in 1894. New York City suffered the first major polio epidemic in 1916, resulting in 2,300 deaths. Epidemics grew worse as the years passed. The peak year in the US was 1952, with more than 57,000 cases.

Poliovirus causes no or mild symptoms in 95 percent of the people who carry it. Others experience flu-like symptoms. But 1 percent suffer “paralytic polio” with varying degrees of lasting paralysis, even death. Polio was known as “infantile paralysis” because most of its victims were children. But adults were also vulnerable. Future US president Franklin Roosevelt was 39 when the virus paralyzed him from the waist down in 1921.

Doctors had no vaccine and no effective treatment. Public officials quarantined homes and isolated patients—doing so even against a parent’s wishes. A child with polio would be hospitalized with no parental contact for 10 to 14 days, and with only limited visits for weeks afterward. All this added to public fear of the disease.



*Photo: Onlookers gather at the 1947 Nebraska State Fair. But what medical marvel are they looking at?...*



*... It is an "iron lung," which helped save the lives of patients so weakened by polio that they could not breathe on their own. A patient typically spent two weeks with all but their head encased in the cylinder while recovering. Oscillating negative pressure inside the chamber helped the patient inhale....*



*...History Nebraska has a 1950s iron lung from Bryan Hospital in Lincoln (in storage, not currently on display). (History Nebraska, RG2183-1947-904-3, 4; 8172-18)*

Dr. Jonas Salk led the team of medical researchers that developed the first polio vaccine. Large-scale vaccination began in 1955. Salk's vaccine used a "killed virus" and was delivered by a series of injections.[\[1\]](#)

Salk was regarded as a medical hero, but the introduction of the polio vaccine came with tragedy. Despite safety testing, in 1955 some batches of vaccine accidentally contained live virus. One company, Cutter Laboratories, was linked to more than 250 cases of polio. The "Cutter Incident" led to greater government oversight of vaccine manufacturing.[\[2\]](#)





*Photo: Nebraska clinical trial of the Salk polio vaccine, May 1954. From KOLN/KGIN-TV, Lincoln and Grand Island. (History Nebraska RG809-51)*

Dr. Albert Sabin, meanwhile, was developing a different kind of polio vaccine. He doubted that a “killed virus” would provide lasting immunity. His vaccine used a live but weakened virus, and was delivered orally. Sabin argued that not needing injections would make it easier to vaccinate large numbers of people in less developed parts of the world. Salk’s vaccine was already greatly reducing polio, but not everyone was getting vaccinated. Sabin believed his oral vaccine would finish the disease off.

Because Salk’s vaccine was available first, Sabin found it difficult to get support for large-scale clinical trials in the US. His team began working with other countries, including the Soviet Union. The Soviets agreed to test the former US Army physician’s vaccine on millions of their children in what proved to be a successful 1959 trial. The US approved its own large-scale clinical trials the following year. Such was the fear of polio that it fostered international cooperation even at the height of the Cold War.

Starting in Cincinnati, where he lived, Sabin promoted city-wide vaccination events that became known as Sabin Oral Sundays (SOS). The idea was to vaccinate as much of the local population as possible and wipe out polio a city or a county at a time.[\[3\]](#)



Nebraska joined the SOS movement in the spring of 1962. More than 314,000 people turned out for the first event in Douglas and Sarpy counties on May 27. Sixty vaccination stations were set up around the Omaha metro area for people to register and drink the cherry-flavored syrup. Local TV coverage resembled the “telethons” popular at the time, with tote boards tallying numbers as they were phoned in from across the city. A small donation was requested but no one was turned away. A staggering 84.9 percent of the population drank the vaccine—the best one-day result of the nationwide SOS program so far.<sup>[4]</sup>

*Above (and detail below): Full-page ad from Omaha World-Herald, June 24, 1962.*

# "Knock-Out the Crippler" with "Polio Punch"

SERVING FROM 11 A.M. to 7 P.M. IN 60 LOCATIONS

On May 27th, 84% of the population of Omaha took advantage of the Sabin Oral Sunday Vaccine Program. In this 84%, the vital preschool age groups in the Greater Omaha area were completely covered. BUT DON'T FORGET!! . . . Polio knows no age limitations, it could strike anyone, young or old. Don't take a chance . . . start today with your Sabin Oral Vaccine Program. This is your opportunity to receive greater immunity more quickly against Types I, II, III of the Polio Viruses. Let us all strive for a goal of 100% participation of all the people in Greater Omaha.

"Polio Punch" will be available at any of the SOS Centers listed below. It is not necessary that you go to the center nearest you, however it is recommended that you do. The locations have been selected following a study of area and population. This will assure the most orderly and even flow through each Center.

*Below: Vaccination card from Lincoln SOS event. History Nebraska 13143-182.*

You have received Type III Sabin oral polio vaccine, administered July 29, 1962. Please keep this important card and notify your family doctor so that he may have a record of this immunization. If you are a student, notify your school so that this may be entered in your school record.

Your Name: Roger Boye

**REMEMBER**—you still need Type II oral vaccine. Type II will be given September 23, 1962.

Lancaster County Medical Society

But that was only the first step. Because three different strains of polio required separate vaccinations, participants returned in similarly large numbers for doses on June 24 and September 16.

Following Omaha's first SOS, communities across Nebraska held their own SOS events that year. In all, about a million Nebraskans were vaccinated.[\[5\]](#)

But before it was over there were reports of trouble.

### **Is the vaccine safe?**

In 1962 nine Nebraskans “developed an illness compatible with” polio within weeks of receiving the Type III vaccine. A US Public Health Service (USPHS) team said it believed that these and other similar cases nationwide were “directly related to the feeding of the polio virus vaccination.” In September the USPHS issued a temporary ban on the Type III vaccine while it investigated.[\[6\]](#)

On December 20 the *Omaha World-Herald* reported that the USPHS had confirmed 11 actual polio cases nationwide that occurred after taking the Type III vaccine. Eight of these involved people over age 30.[\[7\]](#)

The USPHS lifted the ban, advising that the vaccine should be “used for adults only with the full recognition of its very small risks.”[\[8\]](#) Citing fears of public opinion, the Iowa State Board of Health retained the Type III ban until February, but Nebraska officials went ahead with vaccination.[\[9\]](#) The wording of a January 6, 1963, *World-Herald* report is revealing: “A hassle developed nationwide when a few polio cases were linked to the taking” of the vaccine.[\[10\]](#)

In 1964, two Omaha residents filed lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies, alleging that they had contracted polio after the 1962 vaccinations. One woman said she became permanently crippled.[\[11\]](#)

I haven't learned how these lawsuits were resolved, but what is clear is that news related to the Sabin and Salk vaccines remained overwhelmingly positive over the next few years, until polio vaccination joined existing vaccinations as a rite of childhood.

But the “hassle” of vaccination-induced polio was real, though the risk was very small. In 1999, a federal advisory panel recommended that the US use the Salk vaccine because it can't accidentally cause polio.[\[12\]](#)

And yet the issue passed without either a large anti-vaccination outcry or a suppression of news about the risks associated with the Sabin vaccine. The risks were widely reported at the time. And then public concern faded. Why?

### **The anti-vax movement that wasn't**

We could talk about the higher levels of trust that existed in the US in the 1960s compared to today—higher trust in government, higher trust in medical professionals.[\[13\]](#) We could also talk about the lack of social media or even email, making it easier for mainstream media to shape the national conversation.

These things were probably factors, but something else seems more important:

“Medical Miracle: Polio Number Drops to 200,” read a *World-Herald* headline on May 24, 1964. “Ten years ago,” read the Associated Press report, “polio struck down 40 thousand Americans every year. This year, there will be only two hundred cases in a nation of 180 million persons... Medical scientists estimate that at least 212 thousand Americans have been spared from death or crippling by poliomyelitis (infantile paralysis) since 1955.”

The USPHS, meanwhile, had found only 11 cases of people contracting polio out of 15 million doses of vaccine. It wasn’t difficult for the public to see that the risk of vaccination was tiny compared to the risk of not being vaccinated.[\[14\]](#)

More importantly, these weren’t just abstract numbers for adults of the 1960s. They remembered well the “polio seasons” of the pre-vaccination days. They had seen for themselves what an epidemic looked like. They knew the fear.

### **“The virus is still alive”**

What worried the USPHS was not open resistance so much as complacency. The agency warned repeatedly that children born from then on must be immunized, because “the virus is still alive, and until its elimination by universal vaccination there is a threat of resurgence.”[\[15\]](#)

Pockets of unvaccinated people remained. In 1965 an unvaccinated Bayard girl became the Nebraska’s first polio fatality since 1961. The state health director responded by ordering 7,000 doses of oral vaccine for a mass immunization of unprotected residents of Morrill and Scotts Bluff counties.[\[16\]](#)

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the US reported fewer than 1,000 new polio cases by 1962, and only seven by 1974. The US was polio-free by 1979. Worldwide, a further global vaccination effort reduced polio from more than 350,000 cases in 1988 to 22 reported cases in 2017. Despite the progress, the World Health Organization still warns that “as long as a single child remains infected with poliovirus, children in all countries are at risk of contracting the disease.”[\[17\]](#)

The same is true of other diseases. They can come back if vaccination rates decline. In 1963, even as US cities continued hosting SOS events, a new vaccine was being readied to attack another disease:

“How gratifying it will be to speak of measles in the past tense,” said a *World-Herald* article headlined “Victory Near Over Measles.” The article ran on November 29, 1963—more than 55 years ago. Measles, deemed eliminated in the US by 2000, is currently experiencing a resurgence due to falling vaccination rates. [\[18\]](#) Will polio make a similar comeback?

*Thanks to History Nebraska’s Audio/Visual Curator Paul Eisloeffel for discovering this story when he digitized the KMTV news footage (which lacked a soundtrack); Josh Beeman edited the version of the video posted here.*

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- [2] “Historical Vaccine Safety Concerns,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Aug. 28, 2015. <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/concerns-history.html>
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- [4] “Sabin: Omaha’s SOS Result Extraordinary,” *Omaha World-Herald* (hereafter, *OWH*), May 28, 1962.
- [5] “Million Help Write Medical Story,” *OWH*, Jan. 6, 1963.
- [6] “Polio, Sabin Dose Linked,” *OWH*, Nov. 5, 1962.
- [7] “Sabin Type 3 Ban Is Lifted,” *OWH*, Dec. 20, 1962.
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- [9] “Iowa Retains Vaccine Ban,” *OWH*, Dec. 21, 1962; “Board Okays Vaccine Use,” *OWH*, Feb. 1, 1963.
- [10] “Million Help Write Medical Story,” *OWH*, Jan. 6, 1963.
- [11] “Polio Victims File Suit Against Chemical Firm,” *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, Dec. 11, 1964.
- [12] “Jonas Salk and Albert Bruce Sabin.”
- [13] “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2019,” Pew Research Center, April 11, 2019. <https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>; Dhruv Khullar, “Do You Trust the Medical Profession?” *New York Times*, Jan. 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/23/upshot/do-you-trust-the-medical-profession.html>.
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- [15] “Medical Miracle: Polio Number Drops to 200,” *OWH*, May 24, 1964.
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Categories:

[polio](#), [medicine](#), [Omaha](#)